

# LIFESTYLE

Seasonal tastes in food and wine, travel and design

## *Keeping up* **with Ms Jones**

As Chef of the Season Anna Jones brings her vibrant, flavour-packed menu to the Food Halls, she talks inspirational veggie dishes

By AMY BROOMFIELD

It's fair to say that we are in the middle of a healthy-eating revolution. Spurred on by access to a greater range of "natural" foods, not to mention a frenzy of online activity documenting the content and nutritional value of every meal, we are more conscious than ever of what we eat, where it comes from, and how it benefits us. Or at least we're told that we should be. But long before it was the norm to capture and share our every meal on a smartphone, Hackney-based chef, food writer and food stylist Anna Jones was already there, on a quiet crusade of her own to put vegetables at the centre of every meal – without any of the sanctimony, and without sacrificing flavour.

Jones made her first foray into food in 2006. Stuck in an unfulfilling job, she decided to make a career change. "I was doing a bit of PR in a role I really wasn't engaged in," she says as we grab a quiet moment on a hectic day of film-takes and cooking demos. "The same day I quit, I found a course with Jamie Oliver [at his London restaurant Fifteen] that is designed to teach young people how to cook. It was the closing date, so I applied, and five days later I had a place." At the time, London's restaurant scene was dominated by meat-based menus, headed by such critically acclaimed nose-to-tail establishments as St John. So, having completed her traineeship through Oliver's apprentice programme, and worked in a few professional kitchens, it was something of a bold move for Jones to venture out on her own – as a vegetarian.

"In the beginning, I was a little reticent about telling people," she says. "As a chef, people are sceptical if you don't cook meat or fish." But what began as a six-week experiment to omit meat from her diet – during which time she noticed a significant improvement in her own wellbeing – became a new way of life. "I'd been cooking for a while and I got to a point where I had begun to feel a bit jaded about food," she explains. "I was working in a place where I was constantly tasting and testing, and I felt the urge to press reset on what I ate."

The only problem was that she found little inspiration in the cookbooks that were



*"I use lemons and limes as a third seasoning, and I keep herbs in my fridge in glasses like cut flowers"*

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** A selection of Jones' dishes will be available in-store; roasted kale, coconut and tomato salad; the chef's desserts include muffins, cookies and chocolate-almond bars

around at the time. So she began writing up her own recipes, culminating in the publication of her book, *A Modern Way to Eat*, in 2014, followed by *A Modern Way to Cook* in 2015. Each was a revelation, both for devotees of vegetarian cookery and for confirmed carnivores who previously viewed vegetarian food as being the preserve of bland salads and chickpea puree. Hearty dishes such as curry leaf and smoky celeriac pilaf, saffron polenta bake, and Buddha bowls filled with pickled vegetables, spices and coconut milk showed vegetarian dishes in a whole new light – delicious, imaginative and healthy.

The recipes ranged from quick dinners for families to more intricate cooking for entertaining using seasonal produce and

nutritious ingredients, many of which now feature in her regular column "The Modern Cook", which she writes for *The Guardian*. "I wanted to create everyday recipes that felt normal; dishes that didn't require 20 million ingredients that were hard to find," she says. The success of her books led to her being hailed as "the new Nigella" – and while in reality the two chefs' cooking styles are at different ends of the spectrum, it was a moniker she delighted in; in Jones' youth, Nigella Lawson was one of the few female chefs who was young, glamorous and relatable. Now Jones was picking up the baton.

Jones wasn't a total amateur when she enrolled on the Jamie Oliver course. She remembers having a keen interest in food

from as young as 12. "I was something of a 'cooking geek'," she says with a smile. "Throughout my childhood, I'd be the one at home making lemon mousse, when I should probably have been outside playing or doing something a lot less serious!" Instead, she describes doing "really dorky stuff" like making her parents throw dinner parties so she could cook for their friends.

It's easy to see why Jones has earned a loyal fan base, as well as the respect of her professional peers. In addition to her innovative-yet-inclusive approach in the kitchen, she has a manner that is easy to warm to. Her words are precise but not rehearsed, frank but not too serious – and she never preaches about her cookery. Then there is the dry wit and charm that remains

with her even as we approach the end of a long day of cooking and filming.

Both Jones' brother and sister are vegan, so many of the dishes she makes are derived from meals she cooks for her family. She has never claimed to be a nutritionist, and on Instagram there is a distinct lack of clean-eating hashtags beneath her posts. "I just try to vary what I eat and what I keep in my pantry and fridge by making sure I have a rainbow of seasonal vegetables and a spectrum of grains and pulses. I also sometimes swap cheese and cow's milk for cashew milk and almond milk," she says. "I don't count calories, but I figure if I eat across the widest cross section of food, then it's like betting on every horse in the race." Fresh spices and herbs play a big role in her food too. "I generally use lemons and limes as a kind of third seasoning, and I keep herbs in my fridge door in little glasses like cut flowers. That freshness of citrus and herbs is something I really love." She chuckles, before adding, "There's ketchup as well – and all kinds of other standard stuff. Sometimes you have to let yourself off the hook, you know? Some nights I might have beans on toast, and that's fine. And, actually, quite nice!"

As Harrods' Chef of the Season, Jones is bringing her favourite recipes to the store, in ready-made format. "These are my all-star vegetarian dishes developed over my career. There's not much sugar, and it all has a healthy edge and is colourful and vibrant – very different from the usual January detox foods." Some of the hero dishes include a sweet-potato daal with a South Indian coconut chutney, a roasted kale, coconut and tomato salad with a honey-miso dressing, and chocolate-and-black-bean cookies that are chewy, dense and delicious. Everything on the menu promotes her core approach, which she describes as "trying to stay as close to nature as possible". She is also a big believer in "putting joy, generosity and sharing at the centre of everything you eat". ■

**Available from Food Halls, Ground Floor**

**WATCH**  
Download the Harrods app to see Anna make her chocolate-and-black-bean cookies